

Herbal supplements: Natural, but not always nice

BY SONYA COLBERG • Published: June 21, 2010 • Updated: Jun 21, 2010



This Dec. 15, 2009 photo shows ginseng roots at a ginseng-cleaning plant in Wausau, Wis. (AP Photo/Ramde Dinesh)

Websites and labels tout herbal cures for everything from cancer to diabetes as millions of Americans chase natural remedies for their ailments. But a new Congressional study of 40 herbal supplements revealed 37 contained traces of potentially hazardous contaminants.

Lead, arsenic, cadmium and mercury were found in the supplements, though within the government's safety levels. Sixteen of the tested supplements also contained pesticide residues, researchers found.

The study suggested that consumers were being misled about the effectiveness of some of these supplements.

The report was released just as Congress is scheduled to consider food safety legislation.

Investigators found a product label for Ginkgo biloba that said the herb "effectively treats Alzheimer's disease, depression, impotence, memory ... and more."

However, Ginkgo biloba must be taken with care, said Dr. Roger Divis, a Chandler chiropractor who said herbal medications have fewer side effects than pharmaceuticals.

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The herb can't be used by people who are taking blood pressure medication because the blood can leak through the vessel walls, he warned.

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And studies have shown the herb is ineffective at reducing the risk of Alzheimer's or otherwise enhancing memory, according to the investigating agency, the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

An herb helped focus the once-skeptical Suzanne Tate, a Northern Oklahoma College adjunct professor of Spanish.

"I'm the ultimate absent-minded professor," she said. "I didn't have problems with Spanish. It was the little things like where did I put my pen? Where'd I put my grade book?"

Then she began taking a product containing nattokinase from soy.

"When we started taking these, I noticed immediately that my brain function improved," she said.

Tate said she and her husband, Jeff, also a professor, began taking herbal remedies to keep various ailments at bay about three years ago. One reason they teach during the summer is so they can spend several thousand dollars yearly on these herbals and they couldn't be happier.

"They're amazing," Suzanne Tate said.

Another popular herbal, ginseng, also contained labels with questionable claims. A label stated ginseng possesses a "Powerful Anti-cancer Function" and can prevent diabetes, the researchers found.

Mark Maxey, a Western and Eastern medicine patient and Oklahoma City legal assistant, said people must listen to doctors and do some research before taking herbals.

"I would think the American Diabetes Association and the Juvenile Diabetes Association would have had a major news release if they had a cure for diabetes," he said. "One has to be logical."

The National Institutes of Health found no clear evidence showing that ginseng can prevent cancer or cardiovascular diseases. The researchers said the supplement may lower blood sugar levels in patients with type 2 diabetes but the long-term effects are not clear.

The NIH also recommends that breast and uterine cancer patients avoid the product because it may react adversely with some cancer drugs.

Divis said it's risky to take herbal supplements and any prescription drug without a doctor's approval.

Federal investigators also went undercover over six months to visit and call stores and websites selling herbal products. The agency didn't list the names of stores or products but noted several instances where sellers gave misleading statements.

One seller told an undercover investigator that Ginkgo biloba is completely safe because it's all natural and can be taken with aspirin. But the U.S. Food and Drug Administration warns that taking the two together can increase bleeding risk.

"Just because they're natural doesn't mean that they can't harm you. That's a misconception that can kill you if you're not careful," Divis said.

Other sellers told undercover agents that a combined supplement could prevent or control high cholesterol and high blood pressure, and another supplement could prevent Alzheimer's. But

dietary supplements can't be sold to treat, prevent or cure any disease, the FDA states.

"Everything you buy is very much a buyer beware situation," said Sharon Lee, an Oklahoma City software quality assurance expert who has stocked her medicine cabinet with herbal medicines for the past decade.


"The sales ladies ... are not medical professionals. You need to read the label."

She said labeling problems linked to herbal supplements are similar to the Children's Tylenol recalled in 2005 because of confusing labeling that could have led to overdosing.

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